



The Hour of the Embers: On the Current Situation of Latin American Cinema

Julianne Burton

Film Quarterly, Vol. 30, No. 1. (Autumn, 1976), pp. 33-44.

Stable URL:

<http://links.jstor.org/sici?sici=0015-1386%28197623%2930%3A1%3C33%3ATHOTE0%3E2.0.CO%3B2-A>

Film Quarterly is currently published by University of California Press.

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of JSTOR's Terms and Conditions of Use, available at <http://www.jstor.org/about/terms.html>. JSTOR's Terms and Conditions of Use provides, in part, that unless you have obtained prior permission, you may not download an entire issue of a journal or multiple copies of articles, and you may use content in the JSTOR archive only for your personal, non-commercial use.

Please contact the publisher regarding any further use of this work. Publisher contact information may be obtained at <http://www.jstor.org/journals/ucal.html>.

Each copy of any part of a JSTOR transmission must contain the same copyright notice that appears on the screen or printed page of such transmission.

The JSTOR Archive is a trusted digital repository providing for long-term preservation and access to leading academic journals and scholarly literature from around the world. The Archive is supported by libraries, scholarly societies, publishers, and foundations. It is an initiative of JSTOR, a not-for-profit organization with a mission to help the scholarly community take advantage of advances in technology. For more information regarding JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

JULIANNE BURTON

The Hour of the Embers:

ON THE CURRENT SITUATION OF LATIN AMERICAN CINEMA

It is no longer a profanation of Art to assert that political conditions influence creative expression by defining the range of acceptable discourse and by determining who has access to what means of expression. The history of the New Latin American Cinema movement verifies the hypothesis. The revolutionary optimism of the sixties was accompanied in the closing years of the decade by an unprecedented cinematic offensive. *Antonio das Mortes*, Glauber Rocha's allegory of the Brazilian Northeast, coincided with the epic underground documentary from Argentina, *The Hour of the Furnaces*. A group of Bolivian film-makers took their cameras to the Andean highlands to film *Blood of the Condor*. Miguel Littín's *The Jackal of Nahueltoro*, a documentary-style reconstruction of the crime and punishment of an illiterate peasant, broke Chilean box-office records much as *Blood of the Condor's* denunciation of forced sterilization did in Bolivia. Cuba produced the complex and compelling *Memories of Underdevelopment* and, months later, *Lucía*.

Despite variations in form, style, and method, these films shared a common genesis and a common goal. Deeply rooted in the needs and aspirations of their own people, they were determined to preserve and cultivate their countries' cultural heritage and to reinforce it against deforming cultural exports from the developed world. Such simultaneity was no coincidence; it was the product of common conditions which generated a similar awareness and sparked a parallel response.

As Brazilian film-maker Leon Hirszman has observed, militant cinema is to a large degree "permitted" cinema; its survival depends on a commitment, however *pro forma*, to bourgeois democracy. In the decade since the movement originated, social and economic conditions have perceptibly worsened, and the cracks in the political structure which allowed such subversive works to spring up have nearly everywhere been cemented over.

Brazil, Bolivia, Chile, Uruguay and Argentina, all seedbeds for the once-flourishing New Cinema movement, are now under the heel of the same implacable dictatorship that a country like Paraguay has borne without interruption for decades. In Brazil, all civil liberties were eradicated in 1968 by Institutional Act

Number Five. "Progressive" inclinations among certain Bolivian military rulers were put to rout when General Banzer assumed power in 1971. Chilean aspirations to the peaceful implementation of socialism met with a vicious and bloody end in the fall of 1973. Argentina's flirtation with democratic forms was to prolong itself until March of this year, though a slow and unrelenting strangulation of conscientious creativity had been apparent since Perón's return to power. Only Colombia and Venezuela retain the trappings of democratic government, though especially in Colombia with its 20-year long state of siege, the trappings convince few. Peru is the special case: a self-proclaimed socialist military regime which actively courts Western investment capital while it purports to "socialize" private profit.

Not surprisingly, it is only in these latter three countries that the New Latin American Cinema survives, or struggles to survive, as a movement rather than a series of isolated efforts. Given the continuing level of repression, no film activity remains in Chile. Sanjinés and his original group have been expelled from Bolivia. In Argentina and Brazil, long-established film industries offer potential shelter for militant film-makers, but on the industries' own terms. Colombia, Ecuador, Peru, and Venezuela aspire to create national film industries,

Argentina: THE HOUR OF THE FURNACES
(Fernando Solanas and Octavio Getino)



but official favoritism toward commercial interests splits groups of militant film-makers and puts them on the defensive. Only in Cuba is revolutionary cinema alive and well, but that is another story . . .

COLOMBIA: PALACE FILM-MAKERS, PROFIT-MONGERS, AND INDEPENDENTS

At the risk of reinforcing predictable stereotypes, I can't resist stating that my film research in Latin America began with a bang. Firebomb explosions in four major Bogotá theaters coincided with my arrival in Colombia. The Colombian media preferred to sensationalize the incident rather than draw any conclusions from it, but the fact is that all four theaters were associated in name or in deed with Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, the largest distributor-exhibitor in Colombia. *Jaws* (*Tiburón* in Spanish) just happened to be playing at three of the targeted theaters, *Tommy* at the fourth. In all four cases, damage was to property, not to people. The incident testifies to the fact that in Latin America culture has entered the political arena. To the eyes of a growing number of Latin Americans, behind Hollywood's "pure entertainment" mask, there's an agent of cultural and political domination lurking.

Though Colombia, as the third largest film consumer in Latin America, continues to offer a substantial market for Hollywood imports, elements of the official culture-hierarchy are convinced that 1975 marks the "take-off" of a national film industry. To demonstrate the fact, they organized the First Festival of National Cinema in March of this year. Concerted attempts on the part of the government to stimulate national film-making date back to the film law of 1942. A 1971 law, extended in 1974, decreed obligatory exhibition of Colombian shorts at first-run theaters, raised admission prices, established a system of rebates to producers and distributors, and set up a government-appointed Film Quality Advisory Board to determine which films are fit for public consumption. (Censorship of content is the province of yet another advisory board—"advisory," it must be noted, to the government, not to the film-makers.) The particular species of film which this law has spawned is popularly called *el cine de sobre-precio*, or "surcharge cinema." In its attempt to generate national cinema by ensuring profitability, the law has, not surprisingly, attracted many who are less interested in cinema than in profit. By appropriating the social themes of their more politically committed rivals, many officially sponsored film-makers are able to capitalize on the success of militant cinema while mystifying its themes in order to reduce or coopt their potential impact.

Approximately 100 short films, three quarters of them documentaries, were produced in 1975. The most

renowned example to date of surcharge cinema is *Corralejas in Sincelajo* by Mario Mitriotti and Ciro Durán, though some assert that its fame is not so much motivated by its inherent interest as by the fact that it was paired for distribution with *The Exorcist*. (This in turn is reputed to be the result of a deal between the film-makers and the distributors; the former relinquished their share of the profits in order to secure such an advantageous match.) *Corralejas* is typical of surcharge cinema in the convenient compromise it makes between social critique and travelogue. Its subject is both "national" and "popular." The *Corralejas* are a ritual festival in remote Sincelajo where drunken peasants are herded into a corral to become targets of the even more drunken landowners. Characteristically, the film is complacent in its denunciation of these barbarous rites, opting for sensationalism rather than any exploration of the roots of the phenomenon.

Francisco Norden, whose credentials include the London Polytechnical School and IDHEC in Paris, is part of a select group of film-makers who did not have to wait for surcharge cinema to get a corner on production. Norden, whose wife Isadora runs Bogotá's Cinemateca Distrital and is a leading official in the national ministry of culture, has been turning out glossy picture-postcards (*The Walls of Cartagena*, *The Balconies of Cartagena*, *The Route of the Liberators*) since the early sixties. A tour of the incomparable Gold Museum in the Banco Nacional includes a screening of his *The Legend of El Dorado*, a pretentious historical mystification of the Spaniards' quest for the beautifully wrought artifacts fashioned by indigenous goldsmiths.

With *Camilo Torres* (1975), his first full-length documentary, soon to be in US distribution, Norden moves his historical mystifications onto the contemporary stage. The martyrdom of this class-privileged priest-turned-guerrilla convulsed Colombia much as Che Guevara's death, achieved by the same alliance between national armed forces and their US "advisors," would convulse the continent a few months later. Norden supplements the static interviews which make up the bulk of the film with family photographs and historical documentary footage. That this is an "official" version is indicated by who is excluded from as well as by who is included in the picture. The class background of the film's main interlocutors (the current president, the ex-dictator, Catholic hierarchs, lawyers, politicians), not to mention the style and composition of the interviews, reinforces the same established hierarchies which Camilo sought to bring down. Camilo's work among urban workers and the peasantry, as well as his own writings, are obvious sources for one who aspires to an informed account, but Norden leaves them untapped. Camilo's entire political trajectory is dismissed

LATIN AMERICAN CINEMA

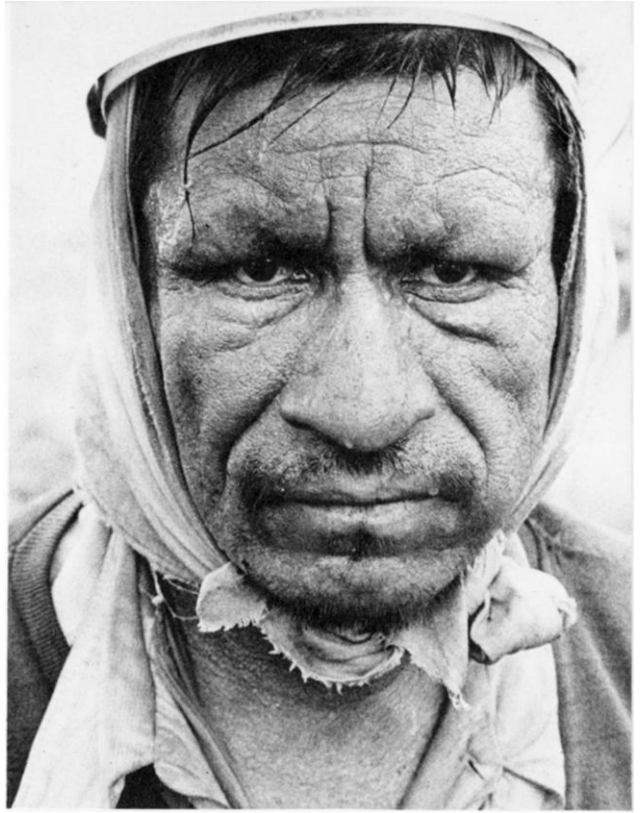
as an oedipal aberration: his radicalization was but a misdirected rebellion against a domineering mother. At one point in the film, Camilo's portly brother, temporarily back from the United States where he resides (how aptly he evokes all that Camilo chose not to become), observes that Camilo's enemies in life have become his intimates in death. It is a fitting epigram for the film. Camilo Torres has been officially eulogized, analyzed, sanitized—in short, assimilated.

Two groups of independent film-makers stand in opposition to the palace film-makers and surcharge cineastes. Marta Rodriguez, trained as an anthropologist, and photographer Jorge Silva are film artisans who have no interest in the industrial mode of production on which film-makers of other sectors and convictions depend. The methods, motivations, and uses of their films could not be more diametrically opposed to those of official film-making. Theirs is a painstaking process of investigation and human interaction in which the finished film is a secondary, almost incidental component. They are more interested in process, in film as a tool of political consciousness-raising and social transformation.

A sociologist might divide Colombia's "lower" classes into three sectors: unskilled urban workers on the margin of the national economy, indigenous populations completely outside it, and the semi-inscribed rural agricultural workers. It is no coincidence that Silva and Rodriguez's three films each deal with one of these sectors: *Chircales* (*Brickmakers*, 1972) with the former; *Planas: Testimony About an Ethnicide*, 1973) with the violent expropriation of an indigenous tribe; the *Campesinos* (*Peasants*, 1976) with the situation of the Colombia peasant.

The latter, which recently took first prize at Oberhausen and at Tampere (Finland), is the longest and most thematically ambitious, exploring the historical evolution and social formation of the Colombian peasantry, their manipulation by powerful political interests, and their growing proletarianization. The genesis and method of *Planas* differs markedly from that of the other two films. Government aggression toward the Guahibo tribe and subsequent official denial brought Silva and Rodriguez to the area to film a counter-informational reconstruction based on the testimony of the Indians themselves. The time pressure under which they were forced to work precluded the lengthy information-gathering procedures which provide the foundation for *Campesinos* and especially *Brickmakers*, which was more than a decade in the making.

At once diachronic and synchronic in structure, *Brickmakers* captures the texture and contradictions of one brickmaking family's daily life, the rhythms and progression of their work, and the predetermined



Colombia: CAMPESINOS
(Marta Rodriguez and Jorge Silva)

futility of their struggle to survive. Occasionally intrusive musical accompaniment and the excessive iconization of two characters make the film less than perfect. Yet as an example of what I would call "contextual" film-making, *Brickmakers* is extremely significant. Before they brought in so much as a light meter, the film-makers spent months acquainting themselves with the community. Hundreds of hours of informal taped interviews constituted the first phase of their work. Once synthesized and analyzed, these began to suggest content and organization for the eventual film. Later they brought in a still camera; set-ups were planned on the basis of these photographs. By the time a movie camera was finally introduced, no one was disconcerted by its presence. The film-makers thus managed to keep superficial and temporary modifications in behavior, always occasioned by the very fact of observation, to a minimum; they wanted the inevitable changes resulting from their presence to be more internalized and permanent. They took care to ensure that at each stage of production the results were evaluated by all the participants. The brickmakers' union, born of the critical awareness which originated in the experience of



Colombia: BRICKMAKERS
(Jorge Silva and Marta Rodriguez)

the filming, has recently asked Silva and Rodriguez to film an epilogue. They want to document the progress which they have made in awareness and control over their lives, and, in the context of that progress, they dismiss the film's current ending as defeatist. The point is that the product of film-makers who give priority to context is never completely "finished."

Carlos Mayolo and Luis Ospina are representative of a more moderate group of independent film-makers, neither integrated into nor completely separated from the official film industry. They see no practical or theoretical reason why they, as serious and skilled film-makers, should not insert their films into the surcharge circuit. After what is generally recognized as an arbitrary rejection by the Advisory Board of his *Sin Telón* (*Without Curtain*, 1974, about Bogotá's most famous peoples' theater group) Mayolo based *La hamaca* (*The Hammock*, 1975) on a short story by a well-known regionalist writer. He reasons that the literary precedent lends a legitimizing prestige which the censors will be hard-pressed to deny. The quality of

LATIN AMERICAN CINEMA

the acting, the authenticity of the setting, and the competence of the direction are almost upstaged by the force of the storyline. As in *La criada* (*The Maid*, 1976), which I saw in process on Ospina's editing table, an anecdotal and often caustic exploration of one human being's oppression at the hands of another ends with a carefully premeditated revenge—all the more emotionally satisfying for its extremism.

That these films work on an emotional rather than a conceptual level is indicative of a series of compromises which these two film-makers have made in the face of the current situation. In abandoning their previous documentary work in favor of their current experimentation with short fictional films, and in doing so as radicals who seek to show their work through official rather than alternative channels, they have been obliged to exchange political explicitness for irony and corrosive humor. They feel that these are effective means of reaching the larger audience to which the surcharge circuit gives them access, and that access to such a broad audience is well worth the price. They argue that the technical quality and thematic aggressiveness of their films will expose the mediocrity of current official production and contribute to its amelioration.

ECUADOR: ONE FILM DOES NOT A MOVEMENT MAKE

"Underdevelopment" has become a sort of omnibus word in Latin America to evoke, if not explain, all the ills which have resulted from five centuries of foreign domination. It is a word which comes to mind at every turn in a country like Ecuador, because the measure of underdevelopment lies not so much in the degree of absolute deprivation as in the range between extremes. I attended a visual communications forum at the Catholic University where, for lack of facilities, sheets of folded paper, taped onto a blackboard, served as a projection screen. I was present the following day when the Central University, a mile away, re-inaugurated its 12,000-seat theater, complete with a newly acquired 70-millimeter projector.

In both cases, American-made films were the order of the day. *That's Entertainment* (called *Once Upon a Time in Hollywood* in Spanish) was the reinauguration special. Several American-made experimental films—highly expressionistic exercises in a primarily psychedelic mode—headed the other program, ostensibly to illustrate the possibilities of noncommercial cinema. The very abstraction of these shorts so distanced them from all but the most archetypal human experience that they were superfluous for any Latin American audience, even one which was some 70% white in a country where the total Caucasian population totals only 10%. The pyrotechnical ostentation of these films, however, was

LATIN AMERICAN CINEMA

potentially functional in this underdeveloped context; as agents of artistic intimidation and perpetrators of a cultural inferiority complex, they were very effective.

Ecuador and Paraguay are the only two countries where the film movement which has stirred the rest of the subcontinent has barely cast a shadow. The road to Ecuadorian national cinema is paved with a single film and a lot of good intentions. Gustavo Guayasamín's short feature, *El cielo para la Cushi, caraju* (roughly translated: *My Cushi Goes to Heaven, Goddammittohell*, 1975) is pathetic in its overwrought sentimentality and sheer directorial incompetence. Arbitrary angles, mismatches, white-outs, and the rejection of any sound track whatsoever are the kind of "techniques" which this fumbling film-maker employs as if by default. His subject is a chapter of *Huaspungo*, an indianist novel of the thirties which still stands as Ecuador's major literary monument.

"Why choose such a defeatist episode," several members of the audience asked Guayasamín, "when today no indigenous community would stand passively by while one of its members was flogged by police?" "That," answered the director with a candor which only underlines his obtuseness, "is exactly what the *indígenas* said when they refused to continue participating in the film and asked us to leave." Both the production process and the resulting film are grotesque caricatures of the theory and practice of militant Latin American cinema. Guayasamín's film is but another in a long line of expropriations of the Indian peoples.

The dialectical tension between aspiration and practical possibility has fueled much of the achievement and innovation of the New Latin American cinema. Reduced financial resources, for instance, necessitated lighter equipment and allowed for more spontaneous filming techniques; lack of access to traditional distribution channels necessitated the organization of alternative circuits and incidentally occasioned a dialogue between film-makers and their audience which has played a crucial role in determining future directions for the movement. It is ironic that Jorge Sanjinés and the Grupo Ukamau, whose trajectory since *Blood of the Condor* is an excellent example of this dialectic,* were prevented from filming the same novel. Undaunted, the group still plans to film in Ecuador under sponsorship of the Central University's Film Department. The practical experience of that project will provide an impetus and a model far more constructive than Guayasamín's negative example.



Bolivia: BLOOD OF THE CONDOR
(Jorge Sanjinés and the Ukamau Group)

PERU: IN THE EYE OF THE STORM

The Peruvian "model"—a military dictatorship which drapes "socialist" reforms over capitalist structures—was once expected to gain a following among Latin American nations. Now it is the converse which demands the question mark: will Peru follow the lead of its relentlessly repressive neighbors? The internal coup of August 29, 1975 temporarily stemmed the rightist tide, and the current premier, Fernández Maldonado, is seen by leftists as the last of the "good guys." The increasing isolation of progressive elements means that any gains are shaky at best, as the recent turnabout on workers' control in the press sector indicates. Grave economic and social problems and a heightened, self-conscious class struggle point to acute conflict in the near future. Many are not optimistic. "We are living in the eye of the storm," a Peruvian film-maker told me. "All of a sudden we may find ourselves in Caracas, thinking of all the films we could have made and should have made, but didn't."

To say that under current circumstances film-making is a luxury which few of Peru's committed film-makers can afford to indulge in would be only a slight exaggeration. On the other hand, no one maintains that Peruvian film-making should be measured by what has been produced so far. Peru's film law, promulgated in 1972, bears a definite resemblance to Colombia's, and both have been severely criticized for serving the interests of private capital and established film companies. *Hablemos de cine*, Peru's widely respected film journal, describes the officially approved brand of film as "sanitized, conformist, superficially 'cultural,' characterized by the absence of anything which might be seen as troublesome, uncomfortable, or conflictive."

The union of film-makers and technicians, and another of workers in the exhibition sector, both

*See "From Militant Cinema to Neo-Realism: The Example of *Pueblo Chico*," by Erich Keel, in *FQ*, Summer 1976.

excluded from participation in formulating the law, have waged a press campaign against it. They propose a new law which would make financial backing accessible to all social sectors, eliminate censorship, reduce the bureaucratic role of the state while strengthening the participation of the various film-related unions, favor cooperative forms of production, and extend the mechanisms of distribution. At last report they had achieved a semi-victory: the old law is on the way out; what remains to be seen is whether or not its successor will be an improvement.

Of the film-makers known outside Peru, Manuel Chambi, a key figure in what Georges Sadoul identifies as the "Cuzco School," continues to work sporadically, recording the rituals of El Inca's descendants and giving increasing attention to the uses to which first the Spanish and then the mestizo governments have put these rituals. Armando Robles Godoy, whose recent features *The Green Wall* (1969) and *Espejismo* (*Mirage*, 1974) have taken prizes at the Chicago Film Festival, is in Bogotá making a mammoth soap opera called *The New Arrivals*. (His "original slant" on land reform consists of taking the point of view of the landholders; his "original technique" consists of applying his flashy film style to television.) Robles prides himself on showy cinematography and insists that technical mastery is the essence of the film art. In *Mirage*, as in its predecessor, formal fireworks exist for their own sake, most often unrelated to or at odds with the narrative content. Actors become symbolic vehicles, and plot resolution, despite certain concessions to a safe Latin version of radical chic, is motivated by an ultimately reactionary fatalism.

Robles's importance lies in his demonstration that underdeveloped cinema need not be visually primitive, and in the apprenticeship opportunities which he has provided to some of those who now make up the more committed sector of Peruvian film-making. Nora de Izcue, who studied under Robles, is a case in point. The style and method of her documentaries, as well as her commitment to militant unionism as the only viable solution to the problematics of film in contemporary Peru, now place her at the opposite end of the spectrum from her mentor. In *Runan Caycu* (*I Am a Man*, 1973) she uses a variety of material (stills, video, newspaper headlines, period documentaries, interviews) to reconstruct the struggle for land and justice among the Quechua-speaking peasants on the Andean plateau. The subsequent filming of Sanjinés's *The Principal Enemy* (1974) has *post facto* turned Nora's film into a potential companion piece. (For his narrator, Sanjinés "borrows" the peasant leader who appears in *Runan Caycu*, making him into a visual and oral icon of the

Inca tradition.) Recounting as it does the Andean community's militant past, *Runan Caycu* supplies essential background which Sanjinés, in order to enhance the role of the guerrillas, leaves out.

It is all too familiar paradox that neither film can be seen in Peru. *Runan Caycu*, financed by a government agency and subsequently edited by them to achieve greater consistency with official views, remains in the agency's vault. This is not an isolated incident. In fact, some political film-makers see it as part of a concerted strategy. Government agencies enlist the talents and energies of militant film-makers but often manage to keep the results under wraps. Anger and opposition can be dispelled by putting the same film-makers to work on another film, though this one too runs the risk of not being released.

Like Nora de Izcue, other independents have a commitment to collective film-making. Robles's daughter Marcela forms part of a group called Liberación Sin Rodeos (roughly: Liberation Without Run-Arounds) which has produced some ten documentaries in the past two years, an impressive number by Third World standards. Thematically and stylistically varied, their films have been consistently criticized for lacking ideological focus and coherence. *Niños de Cuzco* (*Children of Cuzco*, 1974) is a case in point. The film eloquently captures the clash of cultures which dominates the lives of these Quechua children as they make the daily transition from village community to anonymous city streets. Masterful pacing and immediacy of detail lend a lyrical beauty to the rural sequences which at times threatens to engulf the film in a false romanticism. A particularly effective technique has the face of one of the children persist in close-up after the word "Fin" has designated the end of the film. His expression changes to one of solemnity and challenge, but the film, having chosen to evoke rather than to analyze, provides no framework for interpreting this final shot.

One of the most memorable Peruvian shorts is *Teatro de la calle* (*Street Theater*, 1974) by a group called Bruma Films. Because it is more spontaneous than film, street theater is in many parts of Latin America a more flexible vehicle for heightening popular awareness and channeling political protest. Film-makers can render the service of occasionally documenting an otherwise ephemeral interaction between actors and their public. Using a hand-held camera and direct sound, this film combines several performances by José Acuña, who left professional acting to earn his living on the street corner and explains why at the end of the film. The force of Acuña's mime is what makes the film memorable, since the film-makers fail to resolve the

contradictions inherent in this type of project: the camera continually breaks the rapport between actor and audience, focusing on one to the exclusive of the other and fragmenting the film viewer's perception of the whole.

Of the hundred Peruvian shorts produced last year, the one which has received the most unqualified praise is not a film at all, but a filmed photomontage. Difficulties with financing eventually drove its director, Nelson García, to this expedient. *Bombón Colorado, campeón* (1975) is a tightly controlled meditation on the rise and fall of a legendary black boxer of the same name. Inspired in a "creole polka" which has consecrated and perpetuated Bombón's fame, the film uses forms of popular culture to celebrate a popular hero and, in contrast to similar attempts which give themselves away by their condescending attitude to their material, succeeds in conveying a genuine appreciation of both.

FROM "THE ARGENTINE SPRING" TO THE FALL OF ISABEL PERÓN

Argentines are a movie-going people. As a population constituted by periodic waves of European immigration, and therefore characterized by pride in their "cosmopolitan" heritage, they have long granted movies a privileged place in their cultural life. Any Argentine film fan will tell you, for instance, that Bergman was a cult figure in Buenos Aires long before even the Parisians had recognized his genius. In Latin America, only the Mexican film industry rivals Argentina's in terms of duration, technical infrastructure, and size of its export audience.

More than its rival, the Argentine industry has been plagued with periodic depressions and crises. The stimulus to production brought about by reduced competition from Hollywood during World War II was offset by the difficulty of obtaining raw film stock. During the following decade, Perón created protective legislation to stimulate the national film industry, but also imposed rigid censorship. After his ouster, production declined. Despite a rise in production in the late fifties and the emergence of a promising new generation of directors in the early sixties, the oft-predicted "boom" was a long time in coming. Production never really "peaked" until a full 15 years later, in 1974.

In that year the number and quality of films produced, and public enthusiasm as reflected in box-office receipts, exceeded anything in living memory. An output of 36 features represented the maximum which the current infrastructure can bear. New directors appeared and the old "new wave" of the early sixties resurfaced with renewed energies. Topics which

had never before been treated in such a way on the Argentine screen asserted themselves there because, as one film-maker put it, "The public was demanding a cinematographic response to the unprecedented historical moment we were all living through."

That particular historical moment, tragically ephemeral, is referred to nostalgically as "the Argentine spring." In 1972, popular insurrections and general disaffection compelled the military regime, after eight years in power, to revive political parties and step down in favor of general elections. Héctor Cámpora, the Peronist candidate, assumed the presidency on May 25, 1973 amidst popular euphoria. Less than a month later, General Juan Perón returned triumphally after nearly 20 years in exile. New general elections brought Perón himself back to power on October 12th. Nine months later, having bequeathed the presidency to his third wife, he was dead. On March 24th of this year, a "surgical" coup packed Isabelita off to a distant mountain retreat and reinstituted military rule. The situation in Argentina has come full circle. The great release is now only a memory, but several films remain as eloquent testimony to the creativity so briefly unleashed.

Leonardo Favio's *Juan Moreira*, released in 1972, was a kind of beacon which marked the way for subsequent production. Based on the life of a legendary folk hero, but rejecting the romanticized revisionism of traditional treatments, this film broke all box-office records. Tired of imports and imitations, the Argentine populace was demanding the critical exploration of national themes on the national screen.

The inevitable lag between conception and release meant that most of the films generated by the resurgent popular spirit of 1973 didn't appear until 1974, when the reins of political repression were being drawn in again. In the case of the most important film of this period, the changed political climate induced an extreme form of self-censorship. Despite its vast popularity, director and producer pulled *La Patagonia rebelde* (*Rebellion in Patagonia*, shown this year at Filmex in Los Angeles) from distribution in anticipation of a government ban on the film. Based on a journalist and historian's best-selling account of the most suppressed chapter of Argentine military history, the film presents a minimally fictionalized reconstruction of events which culminated in the massacre of several hundred striking agricultural workers in 1921. Nothing in the previous careers of either film-maker suggested their potential for making such a film, but as frequently happens when quasi-documentary techniques are employed in a Third World context, the larger realities assert themselves despite the biases and limited aware-

ness of the "creators" of the work of art. The search for authenticity led Hector Olivera and Fernando Ayala to reject traditional methods—to film on location, for example, despite the remoteness of the region, and to enlist the participation of the local community—so that in effect, if not in intention, *Rebellion in Patagonia* bears a stronger resemblance to militant than to establishment film-making.

The adaptation of literary works for the screen is nothing new in the Argentine film industry; what is of interest is the range of national life dealt with in the adaptations released during this period. Sergio Renán's *La tregua* (*The Truce*) moves Mario Benedetti's now classic tale of a middle-aged, middle-class man from the Montivideo of the fifties across the River Plate to the Buenos Aires of the seventies. The enthusiasm generated by this account of love found and again lost in the autumn of life can only be compared to the sentimental hysteria sparked in the US by *Love Story*.

Other literary adaptations reject middle-class life and cultural forms in favor of popular culture. In Rodolfo Kuhn's *La hora de María y el pájaro de oro* (*Maria and the Golden Bird*), scripted by novelist Gudiño Kieffer, apparitions and amulets, witchcraft, and the antagonistic bifurcation of the female persona are the narrative elements of this reconstituted folk legend. That cinematic expressivity is subordinated to them is apparent in the conventionality of the style. Unlike the brilliant Cuban film *Days of Water* (1971), for instance, to which it bears a thematic resemblance, Kuhn's film merely aspires to imitate rather than to elucidate the myth-making dynamics of rural folk culture. It thus simultaneously commodifies and further mystifies a complex phenomenon.

In Ricardo Wurlicher's trilogy *Quebracho*, different periods, casts, and settings are united by a central thread. Wurlicher uses the extraction of *quebracho*, for many decades an essential element in the leather tanning process, as a paradigm of colonialist operations in Argentina. The dialectical interplay of opposing interests which pits workers against bosses in ever-escalating conflict provides the film's narrative center and connective tissue. Like *Rebellion in Patagonia*, this film "goes national" in theme and setting, and its impact is substantial. But it remains "colonized" on the formal level if one views the imitation of Hollywood-style cinematography and plot construction as an implicit acceptance of the values which generated that particular film style.

The problem of decolonizing cinema has been central to the Argentine "Third Cinema" movement whose foremost theorists and practitioners, Fernando Solanas and Octavio Getino, reject both Hollywood and auteurist models in search of themes and styles adequate to

the liberation process in the Third World. After years of clandestine distribution, *The Hour of the Furnaces* and the pair's subsequent *Old Man Reales's Road to Death* (1971, made with Gerardo Vallejo) had limited commercial runs during the "thaw." Vested interests felt vindicated by the tepidness of public response, but the film-makers are fully cognizant of the underlying contradiction in a commercial release of their films.

The current situation allows for neither commercial nor clandestine distribution of their films. Their work is constrained by a government-sponsored repression which once threatened jail but now threatens death. Solanas's most recent film, *The Sons of Fierro*, a semifictional feature which reportedly assigns one of the political alternatives facing Argentina to each of the three sons of the gaucho hero, is stowed away against more favorable circumstances. Cine de la Base, the other prominent group of "guerrilla" film-makers (known in this country for *The Traitors*, 1972) is now dedicated exclusively to "internal consumption" cinema. The films they produce function as "detonators" of political discussion within a restricted setting. Recent political events may have forced the end of even this super-secret activity.

Two films shown at Pesaro in 1975 seemed to represent the best which can be hoped for given the restriction of the current situation. Bebe Kamin's *El buho* (*The Owl*) is an independent production which testifies to the impressive talents waiting in the wings of the established film industry. It is a sensitive and often visually arresting study of the alienation of work and personal life and the resulting detachment, inner-directed eroticism, and vindictory fantasies of a young female factory worker. Its moving authenticity seems to derive from the cooperative conditions under which it was made. More psychological than political, the film takes pains to expose the disjunction between personal experience and the "official" version of reality, and in this self-conscious "deconstruction" of the alienating effects of modern life, it makes an important political contribution.

Lautaro Murúa, actor as well as film-maker, represents the best that the established industry has to offer. Since the early sixties his films have focused a sympathetic yet critical eye on the Argentine *lumpen*. *La Raulito* is based on the factual case of a young woman who lived among the street urchins and passed herself off as a male. ("It's not that I want to be a man; I just don't want to be a woman.") only to be hounded by police and shunted from reformatory to asylum. The film is of outstanding technical and artistic quality, but one can't help sensing its reluctance to broach the larger issues behind this story of one individual's struggle to be free of society's artificial norms.

Argentina:
LA RAULITO
(Lautaro
Murua)



Even such moderate forms of social criticism are now totally out of the question in Argentina. A portent of the gravity of the situation came a few weeks after the recent military coup, when Leopoldo Torre Nilsson's latest film, *Piedra libre* (*Free Stone*) was banned by the government. That what was by all accounts a rather banal story of deceit among the accommodated classes, directed by the country's most established (one could even say "official") film-maker, should be banned as unsympathetic to the oligarchy has its ironic dimension. Torre Nilsson immediately exiled himself to Spain, several leading actors following in his wake. Alternatives do not come so easily to those who remain. Raymundo Gleyzer, a leading militant film-maker who is best known in this country for *Mexico: The Frozen Revolution* (1971), disappeared this spring. An international letter campaign has yet to elicit any information on his whereabouts or possible fate.* What reports filter through indicate that film-makers, novelists, poets—along with all suspected political activists—are currently being arrested, tortured, and in many cases assassinated with a frequency and a ferocity that rival the aftermath of the Chilean coup.

BRAZIL: A LONG TIME DYING

Censorship is prevalent all over Latin America, but only in Brazil are film viewers given a graphic reminder five or six times during their first ten minutes in the

theater. Every film and every trailer has an obligatory leader showing the certificate of approval from the Ministry of Justice, the Department of Federal Police, and the Board of Censors. Bureaucracy seems to be the name of the game in Brazilian cinema. In February of this year, the National Film Institute, established by the military government in 1966, and the state film enterprise Embrafilme, founded in 1969, merged under the name of the latter. Now approval of proposed film projects, financing, and distribution in and outside of Brazil take place under a single aegis.

But what about the films themselves? What has transpired in the medium since late 1968 when Institutional Act Number Five consigned freedom of expression, or more accurately, those who indulge in it, to the seventh circle of hell? Of the Cinema Novo's "stars," the vast majority have remained in Brazil. Glauber Rocha is the most renowned exception. In the years he has been in self-imposed exile, he has made

Argentina: FREE STONE
(Leopoldo Torre Nilsson)



*The Emergency Committee to Defend Latin American Film-makers coordinates efforts in this country in defense of the growing number of Latin American film-makers imprisoned by hostile regimes. For further information, contact the Committee at 339 Lafayette Street, New York 10012 (212 260-7620).



Brazil: SÃO BERNARDO
(Leon Hirszman)

one film in the Congo (*The Lion Has Seven Heads*, 1969), one in Spain (*Several Heads*, 1970), one in Italy (*Claro!*, 1974) and another (*Revolução!*) in Paris last October. He plans to film *Alexander the Great* on location in Greece and Egypt with financing from Italian television, and was recently in the US seeking a producer for *The Age of the Earth*, which he was prevented from filming in Mexico last year. An article he published recently in a Brazilian magazine indicated that the weary pilgrim would like an invitation home. Latest reports have him back in Brazil, starting a magazine of his own.

On the topic of the movement he in large part spearheaded, Rocha has contradicted himself time and again, alternately declaring its definitive demise and asserting that Cinema Novo lives on in a different guise. Three important films were produced by Cinema Novo directors in the early part of the decade: Joaquim Pedro de Andrade's *Macunaíma* (1969), Leon Hirszman's *São Bernardo* (1970) and Nelson Pereria dos Santos's *How Tasty Was My Little Frenchman* (1971). Each takes on—and meets—the challenge of a substantial segment of Brazilian reality. *Macunaíma*, based on a key novel of the twenties adapted to the current period, is blatantly and often outrageously mythic, operating on

Brazil: LOVE LESSON
(Eduardo Escorel)



LATIN AMERICAN CINEMA

the basis of codes which are indiscipherable to those not steeped in Brazilian lore, but which speak loud and clear to those who are. In Hirszman's beautifully low-key *São Bernardo*,* the life of a single self-made rancher comes to represent the rise of one entire social sector and the destruction of another. *How Tasty Was My Little Frenchman* stands as an island in Pereira dos Santos's oeuvre, a dazzlingly original ethnographic satire which resembles nothing he has done before or since.

Dos Santos's film seems to have generated a following. Two recent features (André Luiz's *The Legend of Ubirajara* and Gustavo Dahl's *Uirã*) are based on anthropological reconstructions. The visual ambitions of the former and its obsession with the naked male body engaged in combat seem to motivate the film more urgently than any anthropological impulse. The second film portrays a family of Brazilian Indians as they contemplate and are contemplated by the good citizens of Maranhã in the early part of the century. That Dahl regrets the outcome of this clash of cultures is clear when his stylistic realism splits apart at the end of the film as he tries, but fails, to turn his indigenous hero's defeat into a mythic victory.

Apart from these two films which risk over-indulgence in cultural specificity, most current Brazilian pictures might be set at the North Pole. All particulars of Brazilian life, past or present, seem carefully excised. Eduardo Escorel's *Love Lesson**(1976), despite its nostalgia for the São Paulo of the twenties, conveys a closed world without history, and portrays characters of indefinite past and uncertain future, offering only a restricted vision of their "sentimental life." The filmmaker rebels at times against his own suppression. The violent images used to convey the sister's resentment of her brother's sexual initiation are never developed or pursued.

The experience of years of expressive indirection enable some to see Pereira dos Santos's recent *The Amulet of Agum** as a pointed political allegory of the current situation. Such exegetes have to question whether a gangster movie with overtones of *macumba* does not though its form desensitize the very perceptions which they attribute to it.

The two best contemporary Brazilian films, in my opinion, are in the documentary rather than the fictional mode. Tania Quaresma's *Music and People of the Northeast**(1975) depicts the resilient ballad tradition of the drought-plagued Northeast. More than a

*Recently made available for US distribution by Fabiano Canosa, 317 W. 99th Street (#2C), New York, New York 10025.

LATIN AMERICAN CINEMA

film about a musical tradition, it becomes an ode to the people who give that tradition life, because the director takes care to convey, through pans and long shots of public and private spaces, the material conditions of life in the region. Against this background, some of the performances stand out like polished gems.

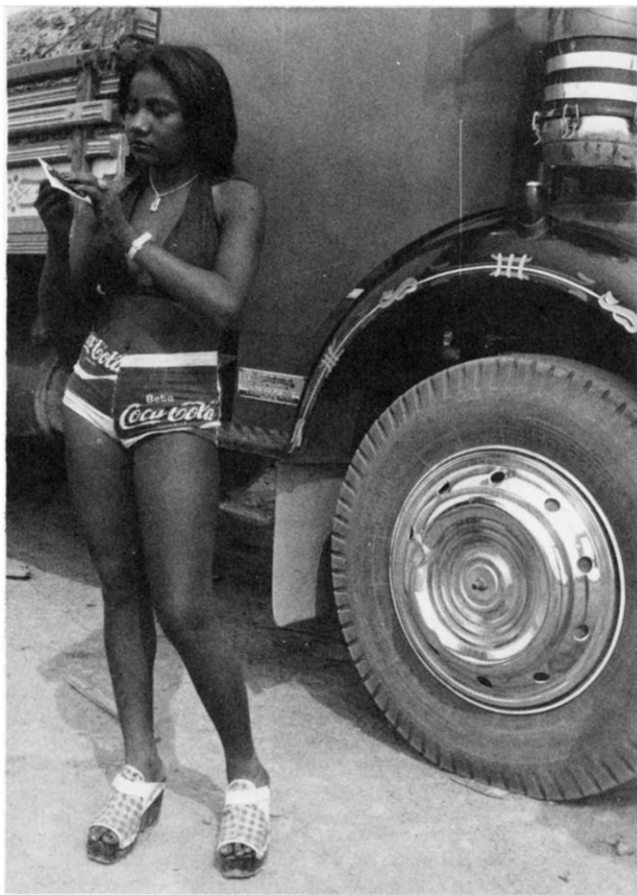
Jorge Bodansky's *Iracema* (1975) is striking in what it eliminates: melodrama, histrionics, psychologisms, hyperbole. It is in fact the antithesis of a baroque, "tropicalist" film like *Macunaíma*. Unlike the current spate of Brazilian films which shut out the surrounding world and thus cut off what they purport to explore (the human psyche) from the medium which nurtures it, *Iracema* inscribes the surrounding environment into a "personal" story in a way that illuminates both the individual and the world around her.

In its unobtrusive way, this film is a kind of modern-day allegory. Iracema, a 15-year-old Amazonian of pure Indian blood, deserts her family's boat and subsistence way of life for the plastic trinkets of Belem on festival day. She is picked up by Tião Braxil Grande, a truckdriver who takes her along on a run to haul virgin timber from the interior. He promises her broad horizons, but on the return he dumps her at a raunchy all-night bar. So it begins: in an increasingly dehumanizing fashion, Iracema is taken advantage of, deceived, abused. (To the film's credit, it refrains from voyeurism and titillation at Iracema's expense by focusing on the prelude and the results rather than the details of each incident.) In the first months of her prostitution, she is mined for all she's worth, then, like slag, discarded. The industrial metaphor is not a casual one. Like her region, now in the throes of "development," like her country and like her continent, Iracema is exploited and then abandoned by those who make big promises but take what they can get before moving on to the next virgin territory. Its direct-cinema style and nonprofessional actors account in large part for the film's subtlety and understatement, but despite its many virtues, it has not yet received approval for exhibition inside Brazil.

VENEZUELA: BACK IN ROCKY'S BACKYARD

If you're on foot and want to avoid an untimely end on a crowded expressway, there is only one route from the offices of Palcine (the best-stocked and most successful distributor of Latin American cinema on the subcontinent) to the Venezuelan Cinemateca: through the lobby of the Hilton Hotel. It just happens to be built on land that was once Caracas's Central Park. This is as apt a means as any for conveying the schizophrenia of a capital that is neither completely Latin nor completely

*Also available in the US from Fabiano Canosa (see previous footnote).



Brazil: IRACEMA*
(Jorge Bodansky)

Americanized but rather a hybrid monster which combines the most distressing aspects of both. Extreme contrasts of wealth and poverty, no less painful for their now clichéd status in accounts of Latin America, are more pronounced here than anywhere else on the continent. It is not surprising that in this playground of the Rockefellers and other members of the international oil cartel, the pick of the flicks are Hollywood-grown. What *is* surprising is that any impulse to an autonomous cinema exists.

The impulse goes a long way back—to Margot Benacerraf's *Araya*, a feature-length documentary on life in the salt marshes, acclaimed at Cannes in 1958 but never shown commercially in Venezuela. The decade of the sixties was rich in activity, but poor in concrete results. A handful of documentaries stand out: Jesús Enrique Guédez's *The City That Watches Us* (1966) reveals the other, marginal Caracas, Carlos Rebolledo's *Empty Well* (1967) analyzes the national petroleum industry; Jorge Solé's *TV Venezuela* (1969) is

a hard-hitting denunciation of media manipulation which skillfully incorporates a wide variety of visual material in a style which owes some of its inspiration to Cuban documentarist Santiago Alvarez and to the Argentine film-makers who made *The Hour of the Furnaces*.

The best of recent short documentary production is attributed to two Uruguayans: Ugo Ulive's *The One-Man Band* (1972) and *T.O. 3*, winner of the Municipal Prize in 1975, in which the camera, except for occasional zooms, remains completely stationary while a former political prisoner recounts his experiences under torture; Mario Handler's *Two Ports and a Ridge* exposes the unequal exchange which characterizes Third World commerce: valuable raw materials sold cheap to purchase over-priced manufactured goods. Manuel de Pedro's *Juan Vicente Gómez* (1975) is a feature-length documentary on the life of a former dictator. Its success at the box-office is viewed as a green light for other serious historical films.

In addition to its technical assets (sophisticated laboratories and equipment, ample availability of raw film stock, private and government capital available to stimulate production), Venezuelan film-makers have an added advantage: their countrymen like Venezuelan movies and show their support at the box office. Currently this cinematic nationalism extends only to features, but these at least take on crucial aspects of national reality. The trend began when Mauricio Wallerstein, son of a famous Mexican producer, made *When I Want to Cry, I Can't*, based on a best-selling Venezuelan novel, in 1973. Its success led him to film *Chronicle of a Latin American Subversive* in 1974. Román Charbaud's *Sacred and Obscene* (1976) also takes up the theme of the now virtually defunct guerrilla struggle during the mid-sixties. The politics of these films are debatable, but at least they offer material for discussion rather than hiding behind a false and derivative "universalism" which excises all national content. After years of delay, the government has finally instituted a subsidy which provides 40-50% of production costs. Nine features were produced in 1975 under this system, three times the number produced only a few years earlier.

Whether or not the next few years verify the optimism of those who predict the rise of an important national film movement in Venezuela, the country has another crucial role to play. Since the mid-sixties, committed film people have been creating a number of important film-related institutions in Venezuela: the Cinemateca, the Film Department of the University of Los Angeles in Mérida, where a large part of the documentary movement originated; various film-makers' cooperatives

and coalitions; and *Cine al Día*, one of the best Spanish-language film magazines, now in its tenth year. The recently established Palcine, the only distributor outside of Cuba which offers Latin audiences access to a comprehensive spectrum of the New Latin American cinema, currently reaches some 150,000 spectators per year with its films. This human infrastructure, responsible for such key events as the Festival of Latin American Cinema at Mérida in 1968 and the Conference of Latin American Film-makers in 1974, has attracted exiled film-makers from numerous Latin American countries and enabled them to continue their work. Venezuela's role is of incalculable importance in sustaining a movement which many powerful forces are determined to wipe out.

BY WAY OF CONCLUSION

In its fragmented, dislocated, and embattled way, the New Latin American Cinema lives on. Everywhere an evaluation of past experience and a reassessment of future possibilities seems to be underway. Direct and indirect repression of the movement has taken its toll. Gradations of suppression, as we have seen, range from the cooptation and mystification of militant themes and styles, through blanket censorship and the indirect forms which it engenders, to imprisonment, exile, even death, as in the most recent case of several Chilean and Argentine film workers. Brazil's Glauber Rocha, Bolivia's Jorge Sanjinés, Chile's Miguel Littín, Uruguay's Mario Handler, Colombia's Carlos Alvarez are a few of those who have been compelled to work in exile, always attempting to remain somewhere on the continent. Others, like Solanas in Argentina and several Brazilians, have rejected this alternative and chosen to stay in their countries at the cost of severely constrained possibilities of expression and, in some cases, enforced silence. Still others, like Colombia's Luis Ospina and Carlos Mayolo, attempt to slip Trojan horses behind the walls of the official film industry.

That militant Latin American cinema cannot, with the exception of Venezuela, be seen in Latin America is eloquent testimony to its effectiveness and power. Public response was too threatening to the status quo. It confirmed a need which vested interests can no longer stave off with imported palliatives, and must now attempt to fill with officially endorsed surrogates. This attempt involves contradictions which can potentially serve the interests of those who aspire to decolonialize rather than recolonize their Third World public. The task at hand is clear: to keep the embers alive until, when conditions again permit, they may burst forth once more into flames.